

# SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT TEACHING WRITING

By Karen Antikajian

Is there more to writing than just traits and modes? Too often, with our emphasis on only the elements that are scored on the state assessments, students produce pieces that are routine-sounding, all alike, and somewhat flat. These pieces may receive a high score, but are they interesting? Who are they writing for? If students feel they are writing for just the teacher or the test, they may have lost sight of audience and purpose—two of the most important considerations for any piece of writing.

The other consideration is choice. Has the writer had any choice of topic, style, organization, or use of language? Or has he or she been encouraged to follow a formula.

Formulas can help, but they can be dangerous. They offer support for strugglers but they can be seductive—encouraging writers to just fill in the boxes or lines. So if you have students follow a format, use it only as a way to get started—temporarily, or only occasionally and with care.

What's a better way? Mentor texts. Use the experts. Model good writing by sharing good literature. When we read aloud to students for the purpose of modeling writing, we need to help them notice the author's techniques—use of language, choice of words, types of sentences, repetition, and so forth. Does this author have a particular style? What makes that style?

Experts recommend reading a selection through completely and then returning to it (or parts of it) to investigate it more thoroughly. Ask your students, "What are you noticing? Did anything surprise you? Write down a line you wish you had written. Why do you like it? Could you do something like thing in your piece of writing?"

How do you choose mentor texts? How can you determine if it is well written? A teacher of reading needs to be a reader. A teacher of writing should be a writer. This is

the premise of the National Writing Project (as well as OWP) and is the foundation of its success as a staff development model. "Do as I do *and* as I say."

There are professional books that will help you choose mentor texts, (see other side) but the best way is to learn to read as a writer. Then you can use selections from your reading materials and other books that you are familiar with instead of depending on someone else's favorites. As you read to yourself and as you share with your students in read-alouds, notice how authors get you interested, keep you turning pages, and make you care about the topic or characters. What kind of language do they use? How do they make the sentences flow? How is one author's style different from another? You might compare Gary Paulsen and Katherine Paterson or a Junie B. Jones book and a Magic Tree House book or two well-written selections from your reading basal.

How do YOU become a reader and a writer? Read with your students, read during every spare minute. Take a book with you wherever you go. Pay attention to how authors create the text and ask how and why. Become familiar with well-known children's and young adult authors. Guide your students to do the same. Explore visual literacy and pay attention to illustrations in picture books. Guide your students to do the same. Help them to notice the importance of the visual elements in nonfiction text—in the text itself such as bold, italic and color as well as illustrations, maps, charts, graphs, etc.

How do you model discussion groups and literature circles? One of the best ways to learn how to question the text is to join a book discussion group such as the TAR groups sponsored by EERC/ORI. It is amazing what you can learn about the text

through others' eyes. Literature circles should be a sharing of ideas rather than someone asking questions that they assume have only right answers. Some good questions may not have answers! Rather, they may lead to more questions: "I wonder . . ." "What if . . ." "Why did . . ."

This is often where writers start, which is why it is impossible to separate reading and writing. They form a continuous circle. The more students read and are read to, the more they absorb language and structure, the more they are encouraged to question and wonder, the more they will have internalized background knowledge, language, and writing techniques that will support and improve their writing. Yes, there is more to teaching writing than just traits and modes—much more.

### Resources:

- Dorfman, Lynne R. and Cappelli, Rose. (2007). *Mentor Texts: Teaching Writing Through Children's Literature, K-6*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers
- Laminack, Lester L. (2007). *Cracking Open the Author's Craft: Teaching the Art of Writing*. New York: Scholastic
- Rog, L. J. (2007). *Marvelous Minilessons for Teaching Beginning Writing, K-3*. Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association.

### How Important is Choice?

At the NCTE November conference, I attended a session entitled "Where Has All the Real Choice Gone? Revisiting an Essential Element in Writing Instruction." Ralph Fletcher and Katie Wood Ray, well-known educators and authors of professional books on writing, were joined by Peter Johnston, author of *Choice Words*.

You might anticipate that these presenters advocated student choice in writing. Yes, but not all the time. Johnston stated that as the expert, the teacher should be in charge. There are certain lessons and key assignments that all students need to experience. But, at other times students need to be free to experiment and write about things that interest them and that they care about. The other two agreed. The concern of all three presenters was that too

often all or most student writing is structured and mandated. If students are all being required to read the same selections and independent-choice reading time is shortened or non-existent, where has student choice gone? Students have no investment in the assignments. Authentic audience and purpose are nonexistent. Reading and writing become jobs rather than joys. If student writing doesn't capture the reader's interest, could this be why?

This is the power of a writing workshop model which both Fletcher and Ray recommend. Yes, the teacher does start with a mini-lesson, but students should not be required to use what was taught in the mini-lesson in their independent writing time that follows. During this time, students should be working on works in progress—things with authentic audience and purpose that the writer has chosen.

Some students may decide to incorporate the new idea or technique from the mini-lesson—which is wonderful. Others may use it in a future piece. Some may not be ready for it yet, but they will have been exposed to it. Skills will be repeated in future mini-lessons and they may incorporate it at a later date. Then again, they may not. That's choice.

You will also teach other lessons that are not a part of the writing workshop where students *will* be required to try a certain type of writing or technique. Even then, whenever possible, give them a choice—such as different ways of starting, choice of topic, audience, or purpose. You will have more enthusiastic writers who write better pieces.

In honor of the belief in choice during writing workshop and a belief in the writing workshop as an effective structure to teach writing, one of the inserts is a chart for students to list personal writing topics. If your newsletter was mailed, this chart is missing. You can download it from [www.literacylane.org](http://www.literacylane.org). Click on teacher resources.